

**Before the  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of	)	
	)	
Connect America Fund	)	WC Docket No. 10-90
	)	
Universal Service Reform - Mobility Fund	)	WT Docket No. 10-208
	)	
Connect America Fund – Alaska Plan	)	WC Docket No. 16-271
	)	

**COMMENTS OF THE ALASKA TELEPHONE ASSOCIATION  
IN RESPONSE TO THE FURTHER NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING  
REGARDING SUPPORT FOR WIRELESS SERVICE UNDER THE ALASKA PLAN**

The Alaska Telephone Association (“ATA”) files Comments in response to the Commission’s Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (“FNPRM”) (FCC 16-115) released August 31, 2016, seeking comment on the process to identify and the steps to eliminate duplicate support levels for overlapping areas of 4G LTE service in remote Alaska. The Commission proposes to eliminate duplicate funding consistent with its universal service goals. Universal service support has been essential to connectivity for Alaskans. Consistent with the goals of universal service, the Alaska Plan will dramatically increase access to broadband service for tens of thousands of Alaskans over the next 10 years. It is vital that carriers be allowed to complete the commitments they have made to improve and increase access for Alaskans in remote areas. Disrupting Alaska Plan funding and related commitments will delay access to advanced mobile services for Alaskans and in some cases eliminate that access altogether.

The FNPRM asks how the Commission should identify the relevant amount of support to attribute to any overlap area. The FCC should not base the relevant support on the population covered in a particular census block, which will disproportionately eliminate funding from more populated—and potentially less expensive—communities, leaving less for the smaller—and potentially more expensive—communities. Rather, the FCC should identify the amount of support in a way that better accounts for the varying costs of serving different communities, e.g., by the square miles or the census blocks that are overlapped.

If overlapped 4G LTE areas are identified, the FNPRM asks whether the Commission should eliminate support to all carriers receiving support in the relevant areas of overlapping 4G LTE coverage. Most remote areas of Alaska would not have mobile service at all without ongoing support. As has been discussed at length over the past several years by virtually every Alaskan wireless company, ongoing universal service support is crucial to the very existence of

wireless service in Alaska's most remote areas. The small, locally-owned companies, including Native-owned cooperatives, who provide this service are not sustainable without some level of ongoing support.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, eliminating support could cause all carriers to turn down service in these extremely high cost areas. Even the prospect of complete loss of support in these areas after 5 years could dissuade any investment in wireless service, leaving these communities without essential mobile service, contrary to the goals of universal service. Some level of ongoing support must continue to maintain access to mobile service in these remote, extremely high cost areas.

Should the Commission identify potential areas of overlapping 4G LTE support, we propose a challenge process be conducted before support is adjusted or eliminated. This would allow the extent of coverage reported on the Form 477 to be confirmed by wireless providers in the affected area and add precision to the identification of overlapped areas. A challenge process similar to the one adopted in the Alaska Plan Order would be an important safety net against disruptions to essential mobile service.<sup>2</sup>

The FNPRM asks how the Commission should award support after eliminating any overlapping excess support. Prior to eliminating ongoing support, the FCC should first determine if ongoing support is necessary for 4G LTE coverage to continue in these areas. Given the extreme remoteness and high-cost of the areas where Alaska's wireless providers operate, a thorough evaluation of the need for ongoing support is critical to avoid degrading mobile service for Alaskans.

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of the necessity of universal service support for wireless service in remote Alaska, see *ex parte filing* by OTZ Telephone Cooperative and OTZ Telecommunications, its wireless affiliate, filed in WC Docket No. 10-90 November 20, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, FCC 16-115, adopted August 23, 2016 ¶138-41.

The Commission proposes that funds eliminated in overlapped areas be used to support other mobile services in high cost areas of Alaska. We support using these funds for mobile service in Alaska. Specifically, these funds should be directed toward additional 4G LTE service outside overlapped areas as well as some level of sustaining support to operate existing networks in extremely high cost areas.

If a carrier loses funding the Commission proposes that carrier amend its performance plan and that it should neither be required nor permitted to include the population in the relevant overlap area in order to meet its performance commitments. When the processes discussed in the FNPRM are implemented, carriers will have already met the 5-Year population served benchmarks agreed to in the approved Performance Plans. The 10-Year benchmarks build upon population served in the first 5 years of the term to achieve a cumulative measure of population served at the end of 10-years. Elimination of support will reduce or eliminate additional population which can be served in the second half of the term and adjusted performance plans will need to reflect this reality. In some cases elimination of support may even adjust the 10-year population served benchmark below the 5-year number because of the catastrophic impact of loss of support.

Should a carrier lose support in an area, it is crucial that a phase-down be provided to allow the carrier to attempt to adjust its operations and continue essential service to Alaskans. As the Commission has recognized, transitions are desirable to avoid shocks which may result in service disruptions to consumers. We propose any support which is eliminated be phased-down over five years, as was proposed in the original transition of existing CETC support to CAF funding.<sup>3</sup> This will allow affected carriers time to evaluate their performance plans to

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<sup>3</sup> *USF/ICC Transformation Order*, FCC 11-161, adopted October 27, 2011, ¶513. Order.

determine what is achievable using any remaining support. It will also allow them to identify impacts to consumers and public safety caused by resulting adjustments to their operations and networks.

Universal service support for mobility in Alaska has been a tremendous success and is making huge strides toward achieving its goal of providing, “increasing access to evolving services for consumers living in rural and insular areas.”<sup>4</sup> Thousands of Alaskans in remote areas now rely on the benefits of mobility that would be out of reach in the absence of universal service support. Public safety has been greatly increased and lives have literally been saved by wireless service.<sup>5</sup> Consumers enjoy a small measure of choice in devices and networks in some areas, and in many more they are simply able to access mobile connectivity, something that was out of reach until enabled by universal service support. We urge the Commission to proceed cautiously with the processes required to implement its policy of eliminating overlapped support to ensure the final result is not a reduction or even elimination of access to mobile services for Alaskans.

Respectfully submitted,

*Via ECFS 12/06/2016*

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Executive Director

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<sup>4</sup> FCC Universal Service website: <https://www.fcc.gov/general/universal-service>. Last visited November 29, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See *ex parte* filing by Copper Valley Wireless, filed in WC Docket No. 10-90 August 29, 2013.